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THE SOCIAL ASPECTS OF THE PUBLIC REGULATION OF WAGES

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The Massachusetts law for the public regulation of wages operates through a Minimum Wage Commission which appoints wage boards to sit in different industries. These boards are composed of representatives of employers and employees in equal number, and representatives of the public not exceeding one half of the number who represent the parties at interest. Wage boards have so far been appointed in three industries. But in only one, that of brush making, has a minimum wage as yet been promulgated.

The brush making industry was selected for the initial experiment, partly because it was so small that it was possible for agents of the Commission to visit practically every establishment in the state and explain the law to employers and employees who were alike ignorant of its existence;¹ and partly because wages in this industry ran abnormally low. Statistics gathered from the pay rolls by the Commission showed weekly earnings as follows:

	Percentage of Workers Earning						
	Under \$4	Under \$5	Under \$6	Under \$7	Under \$8	Under \$9	\$9 or over
All female employees	17.6	42.7	66.2	79.1	88.6	93	7
Female employees 18 years or over	9.2	33.	61.1	74.9	86.1	91.8	9

A chief cause of these low earnings was short time, or under-employment. There were great differences in this respect, and consequently in earnings, in different occupations and in different

¹ A study of the brush making industry made during August and September, 1913, showed 32 establishments engaged in the manufacture of brushes in the state. From these, wage records were secured for 837 women. These represent the total number of women on the pay rolls of the establishments at that time.

The following groups were not included in the tabulation:

1. Workers who were employed less than four weeks during the year.

establishments. More than one quarter of the employees worked an average of less than 42 hours a week, and only a trifling number averaged as much as 50 hours a week.² And as to the different rates of earnings in different establishments, one establishment paid no one less than \$8 a week, and three paid no one less than \$7; while another establishment *paid more than three quarters of its female employees under \$6 a week.*

At the earlier meetings of the Wage Board, it was interesting to observe the attitude of the employers toward the question of low wages. All were indignant that wages were claimed to be lower in their industry than in others, and protested that the figures must be wrong, regardless of the fact that they had been gathered from pay rolls. The horror which all expressed at wages too low to allow a decent living, argued well for their liberality when it should come to fixing a minimum wage.

It was readily agreed that an industry which paid wages too low to support its employees in health and efficiency was parasitic. And it was further agreed that, from an economic point of view, the question whether or not a person was a member of a family group was immaterial.

The requirements laid down by the Commission as necessary for self-support were, respectable lodging, three meals a day and suitable clothing, some provision for recreation, self-improvement, and care of health.

Sitting around the table, the Board discussed item by item the lowest figures on which an unattached woman could support herself under the above specifications. Employers, employees, and representatives of the public, each contributed from his or her experience or from such information as could be gathered. An estimate for clothing was contributed by a representative of the public upon the Board who was connected with a department store,

2. Those who worked at their homes.

3. Those working in the factories, but paid by subcontractors and not by the factory directly.

4. Those for whom the factory records were defective or incomplete.

In all, these four groups represented 240 persons, leaving 597 which are included in the following tables.

Besides the wages paid, additional information was secured for 484 persons. This covers data for age, nativity, marital conditions, living arrangements and industrial history. In most cases this information was given very willingly, in others it was not forthcoming.

²The *First Annual Report of the Minimum Wage Commission*, p. 32, shows:

and was considered by him to be possible only to a woman so situated that she could pick up bargains, and who, moreover, should use great discretion in her buying. The estimates of the employees were cut at every point. Recreation was brought down to 17

Average weekly earnings : by establishments (cumulative)

ESTABLISHMENT	PERCENTAGE OF WORKERS EARNING						
	Under \$4	Under \$5	Under \$6	Under \$7	Under \$8	Under \$9	\$9 and over
No. 1,	19.8	51.5	79.2	91.4	97.0	98.3	1.7
No. 2,	18.4	34.2	56.8	69.5	82.6	90.0	10.0
No. 3,	13.3	53.3	73.3	80.0	93.3	100.0	.....
No. 4, . . . .	.....	.....	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	.....
No. 5, . . . .	.....	50.0	50.0	50.0	50.0	50.0	50.0
No. 6,	13.2	39.5	55.3	65.8	78.9	86.8	13.2
No. 7, . . . .	.....	.....	.....	9.1	36.4	36.4	63.6
No. 8, . . . .	....	....	40.0	80.0	80.0	80.0	20.0
No. 9,	17.6	41.2	47.1	70.6	82.4	100.0	.....
No. 10, . . . .	.....	.....	.....	.....	25.0	25.0	75.0
No. 11, . . . .	.....	50.0	50.0	75.0	75.0	100.0	.....
No. 12, . . . .	....	50.0	50.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	.....
No. 13, . . . .	.....	.....	.....	50.0	50.0	50.0	50.0
No. 14, . . . .	.....	.....	.....	33.3	100.0	100.0	....
Total,	17.6	42.7	66.2	79.1	88.6	93.0	7.0

Hours of labor and average weekly earnings

AVERAGE HOURS PER WEEK	NUMBER OF WORKERS EARNING							Total
	Under \$4	\$4 and under \$5	\$5 and under \$6	\$6 and under \$7	\$7 and under \$8	\$8 and under \$9	\$9 and over	
Less than 30, . .	5	1	.....	.....	.....	....	.....	6
30 and less than 34, .	4	7	3	1	.....	.....	.....	15
34 and less than 38, .	14	8	5	2	1	2	3	35
38 and less than 42, .	21	18	9	14	6	7	2	77
42 and less than 46, .	28	33	32	14	13	5	10	135
46 and less than 50, .	20	58	74	19	17	5	15	208
50 and less than 54, .	.....	3	.....	3	2	..1	2	11
54 and over, . .	.....	.....	.....	1	1	.....	.....	2
Total,	92	128	123	54	40	20	32	489

NOTE. — Data concerning hours were not available for 108 workers.

cents a week. Self-improvement was covered by a daily paper, and a *Saturday Evening Post*; but the latter was questioned as an extravagance. Only the most meagre allowance was made for medical service or dentistry, and none at all for insurance or for savings to bridge the gulf during sickness or unemployment or to provide for old age.

Figured upon the above narrow basis, the sum of \$8.71 was finally reached, itemized as follows:

Board and lodging per week.....	\$5.25
Clothing at the rate of \$75 a year.....	1.44
Laundry .....	.50
Doctor and dentist .....	.20
Church .....	.10
Newspapers and magazines.....	.16
Vacation .....	.19
Recreation, allowing for moving pictures once in two weeks and a theatre once a month.....	.17
Car fares .....	.70
<hr/>	
Total	\$8.71

Very grave the employers looked during this phase of the discussion. And their surprise was obvious when the trifling items they had agreed to one by one were totaled. But no one seemed to apply the figures to his own pay roll. With \$8.71 accepted as the minimum sum upon which the independent woman could support herself, the chairman said: "I call the Board's attention to the fact that this figure is higher than the wages received by over 90 per cent of the women employed in this industry."

Did the Board thereupon proceed to assess this sum upon the industry and assume that the bill would be met? Their task was not so simple. Employers who had before talked liberally now urged that a raise of wages would drive the industry out of the state. Brush making is subject to keen competition from other states, from Germany and Japan, and also to a slight extent from prison labor. Presumably the industry was not prosperous, as year by year it was dwindling in Massachusetts, both in the number of establishments and in the volume of output.

It is easy to argue that higher wages, if accompanied by efficient methods, would cheapen the cost of production. Our chairman, who was an efficiency expert, could speak on that point with authority. But inefficient employers do not become efficient by a mere mandate. It was easy to argue, abstractly, that an industry

paying the lowest wages in the state had better migrate. But such a result of the first application of the minimum wage law in a heavily industrial community might well give a death blow to the attempt at public regulation of wages in this country.

Of course the only way ahead was to haggle, to compromise. That is what a wage board is for,—to find what *can* be done, not what is abstractly desirable; to discover a middle ground where diverse interests can be reconciled. After a long struggle, the chairman's cherished plan for a guaranteed weekly wage as a sort of retaining fee for labor, combined with time rates or piece rates for special processes, was abandoned. An hourly rate of 14 cents, to obtain as a minimum in all occupations, was the best the employers would offer.

Finally, all but one of the employers,—and he was the most powerful and perhaps the most prosperous among them,—agreed to 15½ cents an hour.³ But the rest of the board would agree to this figure only if it were coupled with an advance to 18 cents by the end of the year unless in the interval evidence was shown which would justify a revision. Thus after being in session for more than six months, the Wage Board stood divided in its final recommendation, the employers lined up solidly on one side and the representatives of the employees and of the public on the other.

In view of the fact that the Wage Board had been unable to carry a recommendation which included any part of the employers, the Commission promulgated only that part of it on which there was a substantial agreement, leaving to the future the decision as to a future advance in rate. Meanwhile the Wage Board remains in existence during a period of two years, and may be reconvened at any time.

The decree of the Commission declares:

1. The lowest time wage paid to any experienced female employee in the brush industry shall be 15½ cents an hour.
2. The rate for learners and apprentices shall be 65 per cent of the minimum, and the period of apprenticeship shall not be more than one year.
3. These findings shall apply also to all minors.
4. If in any case a piece rate yields less than the minimum

³ This under normal conditions should involve an advance in rates to approximately one fifth of the employees.

time rate, persons employed under such rates shall be paid at least 15½ cents an hour.

5. This decree shall take effect on August 15, 1914, and shall remain in effect until altered by the Commission.

Recent inspection of pay rolls shows that on the whole the above decree is being faithfully observed, only 16 persons being found who were receiving less than the prescribed rate. This is especially gratifying, as the only penalty for noncompliance with the decree is the publication of the recalcitrant manufacturer.

On the other hand, unhappily, a number of employees are known to have been discharged. And they were told, so it is alleged, that their discharge was due to the prescribed advance in rates. Perhaps it will never be known how far this was the real reason, and how far it was due to the industrial depression which is throwing people out of work in so many directions. All that is definitely known is that one establishment closed a department which employed 16 persons, and is now supplying itself from outside the state with the article it formerly manufactured. But apart from this one instance, it is possible that the minimum wage regulation has but slight connection with unemployment in the brush making industry. It is a stroke of bad fortune that the decree took effect almost simultaneously with the outbreak of war in Europe, which so deranged the industries of the world.

Meanwhile, it must be noted that for those still employed in brush making there is no guarantee that the prescribed rate will work out in increased earnings. Actual wages is a question of hours, which in turn is largely a question of industrial conditions. And even were hours to average fifty a week,—a most improbable assumption,—the minimum wage prescribed would still reach only \$7.75 a week, which is almost \$1 less than the very low sum agreed on as a minimum requirement for living expenses. Thus, the State of Massachusetts in its initial attempt to regulate wages has made but a short step toward bridging the deficit between wages and life.

Now as to the social significance of this deficit:

It is not true, as is commonly assumed, that so few women live apart from a family group that the interests of those who do so can be disregarded. Moreover, those who are members of the family group are not necessarily at an economic advantage.

On the point of domestic conditions of women in industry,

statistical information is available. The United States government, in its nineteen-volume Report on Women and Child Wage Earners, found that 29.5 per cent of the working women investigated in Boston were either living independently of a family group or were the heads of families with others dependent upon them. The first Minimum Wage Commission, whose investigations were confined to working women earning less than \$8, found that 14.4 per cent belonged to families in which there was no adult male wage earner, and that 14.2 per cent either lived alone or were the heads of more or less dependent households. Of the remaining 71.4 per cent who belonged to families having a male wage earner, his earnings were frequently so low that he was in no position to subsidize anyone. Often he was an additional burden.

Demonstrably, the "pin-money" theory is a myth. The vast majority of wage earning women work because they must. And the vast majority earn wages far below the requirements of a decent living.

How then do they live? I answer, for the most part by enduring every form of privation. The majority of them, I believe, are terribly underfed. Every study of budgets and living conditions that I know of shows this. Sometimes women confess it plainly. "I don't know how I ever lived," or "I almost starved," they will say in explaining their circumstances. Others are too proud to confess their privations. "You see I am dieting," was the explanation of a girl for her two cent lunch at a cafeteria.

Great effort was made by the first Minimum Wage Commission to get behind the pay roll and to learn something of the life story. Personal and domestic data were gathered by interviews with 4672 girls and women. The facts ascertained, of course, were chiefly formal. But intimate talks were often possible, and many visits were made at the home, where there was opportunity for full confidences. As I tried to sum up our findings, two impressions stood out clearly in my mind: first, that of the integrity of women who endure with cheerfulness and fortitude privations which need not be borne if "the easier way" were followed; and, second, that the lives of many of them were so bitterly hard as to be akin to a crime against nature.

Just imagine a young girl whose home is so meagre that she has literally no social life except upon the streets; whose every

pleasure depends upon a man to treat her; whose legitimate desires for gaiety, for love, for what she conceives as life, expose her on every hand to pitfalls. And there you have the circumstances which confront practically every girl who belongs to the lower levels of the industrial class.

Among the girls and women whom the first Minimum Wage Commission interviewed, there was one, just one, whom it was learned had illicit resources. The girl's story was very pitiful. When she talked with our investigator she burst into bitter weeping. "How can I help it," she plead. "No girl can *get by* on \$6 a week. She can't *get by*. And when I first went wrong I was hungry; honest to God, I was hungry!"

I do not tell this story that an inference may be drawn in regard to low wages which I do not draw. I tell it to illustrate the point I have made,—that a girl who earns \$6 a week, unless she is helped out somehow, must go hungry.